

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hovenweep National Monument Named World's Newest International Dark Sky Park

TUCSON, ARIZ., 1 July 2014 – The star-filled skies of Hovenweep National Monument along the Utah-Colorado border have new protections as the International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) announced today it has designated Hovenweep as the world's seventeenth International Dark Sky Park. In designating the new Park at the Gold-tier sky quality level, IDA recognizes the notably dark skies over the Monument and efforts of the National Park Service (NPS) to protect them for future generations of visitors. It is the first IDA Dark Sky Park to span more than one U.S. state, and is the second IDA-accredited site in the state of Utah after Natural Bridges National Monument. Both Natural Bridges and Hovenweep are jointly managed under the same NPS administrative staff.

"We are happy to welcome Hovenweep into IDA's family of International Dark Sky places. It is the fifth such place in our program from the Colorado Plateau, highlighting the growing interest and importance of night sky protection throughout the region," said IDA Acting Executive Director Scott Kardel

Gordon Gower led the effort to obtain IDA recognition for the Monument, an undertaking that served as the capstone of the five years he spent at NPS prior to his recent retirement. He traces his interest in astronomy and dark skies to his school days when he randomly chose famed British amateur astronomer Sir Patrick Moore's *Picture History of Astronomy* from a library shelf for a school reading assignment. "I think Sir Patrick would be pretty happy with me and the outcome for the Monument," Gower said. "Hovenweep is an island of solitude and darkness much needed by the over-stimulated nerves of modern city dwellers."

While the Monument has very little outdoor lighting, receiving IDA recognition was contingent upon developing a formal plan to guide future park development and lighting installations. Superintendent Jim Dougan points out that the Monument's Management Plan now "recognizes dark skies as one of several integral resources" that makes Hovenweep unique. "We have adopted energy conservation and efficient lighting as cornerstones to our public messaging about stewardship of resources in general and the night sky in particular," Dougan explained.

Cliff Spencer, Superintendent of Mesa Verde National Park, applauded today's announcement. "Unspoiled natural lightscapes have natural, cultural, and scenic importance and are managed by the National Park Service to preserve these values," Spencer said. "This commitment to preserve, promote, and interpret the dark-sky resources of Hovenweep National Monument will only increase as pristine skies become less available elsewhere."

A Centuries-Old Hideaway

Hovenweep International Dark Sky Park consists of 785 acres (318 hectares) of federal lands divided among six non-contiguous park units along the Utah-Colorado border in the 'Four

Corners' region of the American Southwest. It is particularly remote among the archaeological sites of the Four Corners and is noted for its undeveloped, natural character. The Monument takes its name from a Paiute/Ute word that means "deserted valley" and was adopted by pioneer photographer William Henry Jackson after his 1874 visit. Ruins of six prehistoric villages in the Monument, built between A.D. 1200 and 1300, testify to the ingenuity of their builders who flourished in a harsh, desolate landscape.

Little has changed in the intervening centuries. Where the people of the Ancestral Puebloan culture once led hardscrabble lives in an unforgiving high-desert terrain, modern tourists to the Colorado Plateau now marvel at the art and architecture they left behind. They may also experience something quite close to the primordial nighttime darkness that existed everywhere before the advent of electricity and artificial light at night. Hovenweep's seclusion has largely preserved its dark night skies in a condition similar to that of its 13th century heyday.

Skywatchers Then and Now

Modern visitors to the Monument share their interest in the night sky with its ancient inhabitants. The Ancestral Puebloans were keen skywatchers, often deliberately orienting their buildings with points on the local horizon where the Sun rose or set on the longest and shortest days of the year. Evidence suggests that some Hovenweep structures, including its iconic "Castle", were built with small openings in exterior walls, directing beams of the rising or setting sun such that they fell on particular construction features only on specific, important dates. Researchers believe these orientations turned the structures into calendar devices used to predict dates of planting and harvest, crucial information for a community of subsistence farmers.

Recognizing that visitors to Hovenweep go far off the beaten path in traveling to its remote location, the Monument leadership has worked to provide a variety of activities that satisfy the longing for seclusion both day and night. To afford visitors a place to see the primeval darkness above Hovenweep at their convenience, the Monument is open 24 hours a day throughout the year. Despite limited resources, the Monument administration has acquired an 11" Schmidt-Cassegrain telescope and a pair of 10.5x70 binoculars for dark sky programs, which are held several times a year during the warmer months. Experienced amateur astronomer volunteers put on the programs.

It is hoped that today's IDA recognition of Hovenweep will help further the conservation of dark night skies on the lands of the neighboring Navajo and Ute Mountain Nations, as well as at nearby Canyon of the Ancients National Monument.

Images



Left: The summer Milky Way is seen over Hovenweep Castle at the Square Tower unit, Hovenweep National Monument. (Credit: Wally Pacholka / AstroPics.com)

<http://bit.ly/1w3CTDU>

Right: The Milky Way rises over Ancestral Puebloan masonry ruins of the Square Tower Group at Hovenweep National Monument. (Credit: Jacob W. Frank / National Park Service)

<http://bit.ly/1w3CwZT>

About the IDA Dark Sky Places Program

IDA established the International Dark Sky Places conservation program in 2001 to recognize excellent stewardship of the night sky. Designations are based on stringent outdoor lighting standards and innovative community outreach. Since the program began, seven Communities, 17 Parks and eight Reserves have received International Dark Sky designations. For more information about the International Dark Sky Places Program, visit <http://darksky.org/night-sky-conservation/dark-sky-places>.

About IDA

The International Dark Sky Association, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based in Tucson, Arizona, advocates for the protection of the nighttime environment and dark night skies by educating policymakers and the public about night sky conservation and promoting environmentally responsible outdoor lighting. More information about IDA and its mission may be found at <http://www.darksky.org>.

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